

St. Thomas of Canterbury

Chancellor, Archbishop and Saint



Thomas Becket statue in the crypt, Canterbury cathedral

Thomas Becket, born c. 1118, in Cheapside, London, son of a Norman merchant, rose to become a dangerous adversary of his king, Henry II, and one of the most venerated medieval Christian saints.

He loved wealth and power, becoming Lord Chancellor and the king's close companion and friend, assisting him in asserting royal authority over the church.

He resisted his appointment by the king as Archbishop of Canterbury, but eventually agreed and dramatically changed, becoming devout and loyal to church and pope, undermining royal authority and sacrificing the king's friendship.



Becket window in Canterbury cathedral



Archbishop Becket disputing with Henry II (C14 depiction)

He fled from Henry's wrath in 1164 and spent six years in exile in France, returning on 2 December 1170 after an uneasy reconciliation with the king. He continued to challenge and infuriate Henry by excommunicating royal servants and bishops loyal to the king, prompting Henry to utter his famous cry: 'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?'

Four knights took the king's words literally and on 29 December slaughtered Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, which rapidly became a focus of pilgrims claiming miraculous cures.

Becket was swiftly canonised in 1173, Henry did penance the following year and Becket's remains were translated from the crypt to a magnificent shrine in the Trinity Chapel at Canterbury in 1220.



Wall-painting c.1490 in the Guild Chapel, Stratford-on-Avon (drawing by Thomas Fisher 1806)



Becket martyrdom: roof boss, Exeter Cathedral (Photograph: AnthonyR2010, Flickr)



Colin Dudley - Watercolour - "Reconstruction of the Shrine of St. Thomas Becket, Canterbury Cathedral", 1969

For almost four centuries, this shrine was one of the most famous in Europe, until in 1538 Henry VIII suppressed any imitations of Becket's opposition to royal power by decanonising him and destroying or defacing all evidence of him nationwide, including the Canterbury shrine.

